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Daily Missoulian - The Lesson of Laos

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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The Marshall Plan in Europe showed what foreign aid can do to help ravaged nations get back on their feet. Some of the Point Four, people-to-people assistance in health, education, agriculture and so forth which has gone to Latin America, Asia and Africa has also proved to be very helpful and has won much good will for the American people.

But recent events in Laos reveal the other side of the coin. They show that aid is no substitute for intelligent policy, carefully worked out and prudently administered. Aid is not only not a panacea but on the contrary can sometimes be ~~even~~ wasteful and dangerous. It has proved to be both in Laos.

During the past eight years, our government has put about three hundred million dollars into Laos. That is a great deal of money for a small pastoral country in remote Southeast Asia. Since there are only 2 or 3 million Laotians, the aid-total calculates to well over a thousand dollars a person. That is an enormous amount in a country which just a few years ago had an annual per capita income of not more than \$50.00 a year.

What has been the result of these huge expenditures? There is little to show for them except social disruption, political chaos and armies on the loose. The people of Laos have gained little from the vast outpouring of aid. On the contrary, they face the prospect that their homeland will be overrun from several sides and the danger is great that they will even disappear behind the Iron Curtain.

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The United States has nothing to show for its well-meaning expenditures, except a dangerous involvement. From almost a complete unawareness even of the existence of Laos a decade ago, we have been plunged deeply into its affairs. When I first visited Laos in 1953, there were only 2 American officials in the entire country. A recent count shows Americans numbering in the hundreds.

The lessons of Laos are clear. First of all, we have been guilty of a gross over-commitment of aid and prestige in that country. In 1954, I called attention to that danger but the ever-deepening involvement continued. Second of all, the only way in which the independence of Laos could be preserved while avoiding a deep involvement on our part would have been by a policy of neutralization of that country, a policy which we did not actively pursue.

It may or may not be too late now for that kind of a policy and a reduction of our commitment in Laos. If it is not, then peace may yet be established on that basis.

It is to be hoped that if the situation holds still long enough the new Administration will take the lesson of Laos to heart and seek with vigorous diplomacy to neutralize the situation. What applies in Laos applies also to Africa and elsewhere among less-developed nations. That would appear to me to be the best hope for encouraging progress of those nations, increasing the prospects for peace in the world and reducing the enormous burdens of military expenditures and aid which we now carry.